

VZCZCXRO4167
OO RUEHDT RUEHPB
DE RUEHJA #0837/01 1341016
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
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FM AMEMBASSY JAKARTA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 2324
INFO RUCNARF/ASEAN REGIONAL FORUM COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHRL/AMEMBASSY BERLIN 0614
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 0924
RUEHOT/AMEMBASSY OTTAWA 1424
RUEHTC/AMEMBASSY THE HAGUE 3482
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 JAKARTA 000837

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DEPT FOR EAP, EAP/MTS, EAP/MLS, EAP/RSP
NSC FOR E.PHU

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/14/2019

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [ID](#) [BM](#)

SUBJECT: BURMA -- NEW INITIATIVES FROM ASEAN AND INDONESIA

REF: JAKARTA 698 AND PREVIOUS

Classified By: Dep/Pol/C Stanley Harsha, reasons 1.4 (b+d).

11. (C/NF) SUMMARY: ASEAN has appointed a Special Envoy to coordinate reconstruction of parts of Burma devastated by cyclone Nargis last year. The envoy, Indonesian William Sabandar, will also seek way to address governance and strengthen Burmese civil society as part of his mission. In other Burma news, British PM Gordon Brown has stepped up efforts to engage President Yudhoyono on Aung San Suu Kyi's detention. Like-minded Embassies in Jakarta are exploring ways to encourage greater Indonesian leadership on the issue after this year's elections. END SUMMARY.

ASEAN SPECIAL ENVOY BEGINS WORK

12. (C) ASEAN Secretary General Surin Pitsuwan has appointed William Sabandar as Special Envoy to coordinate the reconstruction of areas of Burma devastated by cyclone Nargis in May 2008. Sabandar, an Indonesian-national, formerly directed the Nias Relief and Reconstruction Agency (BRR). (Note: The BRR managed reconstruction following the March 2005 earthquake in Nias, on the west coast of Sumatra. It was modeled on the body that rebuilt Aceh after the December 2004 tsunami. International relief experts have praised the Nias BRR for its professionalism, effectiveness and transparency.) Sabandar reports directly to ASEAN SecGen Surin and will be based in Rangoon.

13. (C) Sabandar told us that his primary mandate is to transform the Tripartite Coordinating Group (TCG) into a reconstruction agency modeled on the BRR. (Note: The TCG includes the Burmese government, ASEAN and the UN.) ASEAN aims to address the humanitarian needs of the Burmese people, particularly in infrastructure and health. Sabandar said coordination with international donors will be critical to his mission's success.

14. (C) While humanitarian reconstruction offers an "opening" into Burma, Sabandar said he would pursue other objectives on behalf of ASEAN SecGen Surin. Chief among these will be trying to improve transparency and governance in Burma. One strategy on this front will be seeking training opportunities for Burmese officials in other ASEAN countries.

15. (C) Sabandar also hopes to strengthen Burma's NGOs. He plans to use his extensive network of NGO contacts to build connections between Indonesian and Burmese NGOs. This, he hopes, will create opportunities for training, exchanges and

partnerships between NGOs in the two countries.

¶6. (C) The Burmese government remains difficult to work with, Sabandar conceded. He told us that the GOB canceled the planned Aceh visit of Burmese disaster-relief officials due to sensitivities over the presence of Rohingya refugees from Burma in the province. He also noted that the GOB continued to restrict the operations of the TCG. Sabandar said he would ask SecGen Surin to press Burmese officials to cooperate with his efforts.

¶7. (C) Sabandar will also pursue GOI objectives in Burma and reports directly to President Yudhoyono's office on the matter. (Note: Sabandar remains a GOI employee seconded to the ASEAN Secretariat for this assignment.) The recent plight of Burmese Rohingya refugees now in Indonesia's Aceh province had helped convince President Yudhoyono that Burma must be addressed as a regional issue (see reftel). Should he win a second term in this year's presidential election--a seemingly likely eventuality--Yudhoyono plans to give Burma increased attention, according to Sabandar. However, what form that attention might take remains unclear at this point.

INDONESIA'S POSSIBLE ROLE

¶8. (C/NF) The UK government has urged Indonesia to play a more active role on Burma, particularly the matter of Aung San Suu Kyi's (ASSK) continued detention. British Embassy Pol/C Julia Nolan told poloff that PM Brown has written to President Yudhoyono (SBY) urging the Indonesian leader to press the Burmese regime not to renew the order for ASSK's

JAKARTA 00000837 002 OF 002

detention. So far, SBY's office has not indicated whether he will take any action in this matter. PM Brown will consider calling Yudhoyono on this issue should there be no response to the letter.

¶9. (C/NF) Other like-minded countries look to Indonesian leadership on Burma. Poloff met Burma watchers from the British, Canadian, Dutch and German Embassies May 13 to discuss strategies to engage Indonesian on this issue. Emboffs agreed that President Yudhoyono's likely second term provided a good opportunity for new Indonesian initiatives on Burma. One approach the GOI is reportedly considering would be the appointment of a special envoy on Burma.

¶10. (C/NF) To stimulate Indonesian initiatives on Burma, like-minded missions will explore supporting an informal brainstorming session among key Indonesians. The session, which would be held before the new administration takes office, would include academics, parliamentarians, and current and former government officials. An Indonesian think tank or university would host the event, with discrete support from one or more Western embassies. The goal would be to produce a set of policy recommendations for action by the new administration. Canadian Embassy officials said it likely that Ottawa would support this idea and promised to check on the matter.

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